

## 2. A New Confucian Social Harmony

Prof. Dr. B. Dessein

Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Department of Languages and Cultures  
of South and East Asia, Ghent University

### 1. Traditional Chinese Society

We know from early Chinese literature that traditional Chinese society knew four social groups: literati (*shi*), farmers (*nong*), artisans (*gong*), and merchants (*shang*), the farmers being by far the numerically largest group. These four groups developed from within a former twofold social stratification of society into the 'higher' (*shang* – other *shang*) and 'lower' (*xia*) classes.

Originally, this classification was based on functional grounds: the four classes were expected to each fulfil their proper tasks, this fulfilment being seen as a prerequisite for social harmony. During the lifetime of Confucius (550-479 BCE), a moral appreciation was attached to this functional classification. As the ruling class, the literati regarded themselves to be the morally most elevated social class, one that used the other social groups as 'instruments' (*qi*). Already the *Lunyu*, the work in which the sayings of Confucius are preserved, alluded to this:

When a *junzi* (nobleman) uses people, he does so as if they were instruments (*qi*).  
(*Lunyu*, 13, 25)

When Confucianism became the official orthodoxy in the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), this social stratification was institutionalized and the Confucians became the most conservative group in society. Upward social mobility became virtually impossible. With the farmers as the numerically most important social group, China developed into an agrarian society, characterized as an assembly of economically individual farmers' communities, each with its own peculiarities but having in common their subordination to the elite culture. The members of this elite shared their adherence to a 'common ideology': Confucianism. Thus Confucianism crafted traditional Chinese society as an organization (the Weberian *Gesellschaft*) consisting of different communities (the Weberian *Gemeinschaften*). Dissatisfaction on the part of individual economic communities was channelled into peasant revolts, messianic movements and secret societies that,

not infrequently, were inspired by the religious belief of the group concerned. Any disruption of the hierarchical order was, by the Confucians, interpreted as the ruling emperor's loss of the 'heavenly mandate to rule'.

## 2. Social Changes at the End of the Empire

The social model described above remained basically unchanged until the middle of the 19th century when, due to the industrialization of China, essentially three new social groups developed: the industrial proletariat, the industrial bourgeoisie, who were no longer interested in becoming part of the class of literati, and the new intellectuals. In the course of China's imperial history, moreover, China had expanded territorially and become a multi-ethnic state.

It was in the context of the economic and political dominance of the West in China following the defeat of China by Britain in the Opium War (1839-1842) that young intellectuals developed their political theories. According to them, the Confucians could no longer be seen as the protectors of the cultural norm. They tried to establish a 'new China', a modern, independent Chinese nation state, led by intellectuals who were schooled in Western sciences and ideologies. Liang Qichao (1873-1929) saw collaboration among the Han, the numerically largest ethnic group in the multi-ethnic China, as the only way for them to survive as a group. In this way, he simultaneously opposed both the West and the Manchu government of the last imperial dynasty of the Qing (1644-1911). For Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen) (1866-1925), *minzu* was synonymous with *guozu*: 'statism'. He saw ethnicity as fundamental in the creation of a 'new China' as, so he claimed, 'China has been a nation of one people since the Qin and Han Dynasties'. When, in his inaugural speech at the first congress of the Nationalist Party in January 1912, he stated that he no longer wished to 'govern' the state through the Party (*yi dang zhi guo*), but to 'establish' it through the Party (*yi dang jian guo*), he gave expression to his conviction that nationalist feelings for the state are identical with such feelings for the Nationalist Party. The new term '*dangguo*' (party state) incarnates this concept. This means that the only possibility for the citizens to contribute to the 'establishment of the nation state' was to become member of the Party. This policy, further, invoked ethnic tension between the Han and some non-Han ethnic groups.

The stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles which transferred German rights in the Chinese province of Shandong to Japan resulted in protests across all social

### Reflections on contemporary Chinese society: different perspectives

groups in China. The weak response of the Nationalist Party to the Japanese aggression of the early 1930s, furthermore, convinced the rural population that only the Chinese Communist Party, established in 1921 (hereafter CCP), could lead them in their resistance against Japan. The industrial proletariat that worked in Western factories also supported the CCP. Mismanagement in the cities, inflation and corruption also weakened support for the Nationalist Party in circles of the new industrial elite and the new intellectuals. Their move towards the CCP was provoked by the fact that the Nationalist Party had not lived up to its promise to create a strong Han nation state. Different social groups were thus attracted to the CCP for different reasons. To accommodate all these groups, the CCP primarily emphasized a nationalistic policy, not an economic one.

### **3. The Creation of a Classless Society**

Although the CCP had emphasized a nationalistic ideology in its battle against Japan, once it came to power in 1949, it turned to Marxism-Leninism. This choice was not inevitable. Marx and Engels had stated that a workers' revolution would occur in a highly developed capitalist society. In 1949, China was nothing like that. Marxism did provide an answer, though, to the problem how to unite the different ethnic groups of the former Qing empire into one nation state: the Marxist emphasis on class struggle enabled the equality of all the different ethnic groups of the former empire as, in the class struggle, it was not the opposition between the various ethnic groups and the Han was highlighted as the most fundamental opposition but rather the class differences within each of these groups. The concept of the class struggle makes all ethnic groups identical. The concept of the class struggle, further, gives the workers – the driving force of the process of industrialization – a historical mission. The CCP created a new political elite, the *ganbu*, recruited from within the workers, farmers and petty bourgeoisie, to lead Chinese citizens in the class struggle. Redistribution of farmland eliminated the class of the *shi*. The class of the *shang* was also replaced, by state merchants. Society was organized in *danwei*: economic 'entities' that were also responsible for providing social services to their members. All in all, these policies meant a major social promotion for most Chinese citizens. Where Confucianism had been the uniform ideology of the ruling elite in imperial China, and nationalism had had this function in the Republican period (1911-1949), Marxism-Leninism became the uniform ideology of the ruling elite of the People's Republic. The CCP party state replaced the Han ethnic party state of the Nationalists.

#### 4. A New Confucian Social Harmony

When Mao Zedong died in 1976, China was not yet a highly developed capitalist country. Confronted with the need for economic reforms, Deng Xiaoping (1904-1993) emphasized a different Marxist concept than that which Mao had done: that of 'productive forces'. In this way, he succeeded in bringing economic reforms into a Marxist framework, as the concept of 'productive forces' is larger than only the workers: it provides the possibility to introduce capitalist instruments into economic policies, so as to enhance industrial development and modernization.

For the Dengist reforms to be successful, greater economic autonomy was needed. From 1980, the state therefore loosened its economic control, leading, *inter alia*, to a gradual reform of the *danwei* system and a growing private sector. As it remains the CCP, as ruling party, that has to create a capitalist society, its legitimacy is increasingly dependent upon the degree to which it is successful in producing the consumption goods and services desired by the increasing number of consumer-citizens. However, capitalist economic developments have created a growing income gap. In this respect, it is not without significance that those citizens who have suffered most under economic reforms and increased social disparity are precisely those who, in the Maoist period, had been the greatest supporters of CCP policies. The introduction of 'open door policies' has also given greater economic freedom to those regions of the country inhabited by ethnic minority groups. Within some of these groups, this has fuelled ethnic nationalism. It should, in this respect, be noted that the income gap often follows ethnic fault lines. A further consequence of the new economic policies is the increased Western influence in China.

In circumstances in which the Han identification with the Party and her mission to be the party of the workers has increasingly become obsolete, and in which ethnic nationalism is growing, social redistribution and patriotism have become important elements in CCP policy. Patriotism concerns the state as a whole, not one single ethnic group, and thus is an instrument to counter the centrifugal forces of ethnic nationalism. The identification of the CCP with the Chinese nation state implies that the survival of the Chinese nation state is only possible through a confirmation of the power of the CCP. Without the CCP, China could once again fall prey to Western dominance.

Economic policies that, under the presidency of Hu Jintao, focus on the creation of what has become known as the 'Relatively Comfortable Society' (*xiaokang*

*shehui*) reveal a reappraisal of traditional Confucian values. In fact, the term '*xiaokang shehui*' is a reference to the 7th chapter of the *Liji* (Records of Ritual), a Confucian work of the Han Dynasty. Here, we read:

This is why Yu, [Cheng] Tang, [King] Wen, [King] Wu, king Cheng and the Duke of Zhou were selected. Of these six gentlemen (*junzi*), there is none who does not follow the rituals (*li*). They have manifested their justice, tested their trustworthiness, revealed those who had made mistakes, executed benevolence, made [people] give way to each other, and have instructed the people to constantly do so. Those who did not do so were chased away by those having power and position, and they were regarded as unfortunate by the masses of the people. [Then came] what is said to be a 'relatively comfortable society' (*xiaokang*).

The term '*xiaokang*' can be traced back to the Confucian classic *Shijing* (Classic of Poetry), the material of which dates back to the 10th century BCE. Here, we read:

- The people indeed are heavily burdened,
- But perhaps a little ease (*xiaokang*) may be got for them.

The message the '*Xiaokang shehui*' conveys is thus that the masses – Han and non-Han alike – resort to a moral leadership that will guide them to a relatively comfortable society through economic development and social redistribution. This policy has to alleviate economic and social inequality, as well as to eliminate ethnic tension. In this way, Marxist rhetoric (the egalitarian society) is brought within a Confucian framework. The same type of fusion of Confucian doctrine and Marxist dogma is also evident in the maxim: '*hexie shehui*', translated as 'harmonious society'. Although there is no direct reference to this concept in the Confucian literature, the maxim is generally accepted to be related to the concept 'brotherhood' (*datong*) of the same 7th chapter of the *Liji*:

When the big road of virtue was followed, all under heaven was public good. Functionaries were selected according to their abilities. Their words were trustworthy, and they cultivated harmony. Therefore, people did not only treat their own relatives as relatives, did not only treat their own children as children, and made sure that elder people had all they needed until the end of their days,

that grown-ups had all they needed, that children had all they need to grow, that widowers and widows, orphans, and sick ones all had what they needed to sustain themselves. They made sure that men had a job, and women had a place where they belonged. They did not allow the harvest to be left in the field, but neither did they want to hoard it for themselves. They disliked that their power was not made useful for others, but neither did they want to use it for themselves. Therefore, bad plans were not put into practice, there were no robbers, thieves, nor traitors. Therefore, outer doors were not closed. This is what is called the universal brotherhood (*datong*).

In its rhetoric, contemporary economic and social policies reconnect to traditional Confucian values. It is, in this context, noteworthy that, whereas in the Republican period and in the first decades of the People's Republic, Confucian culture was seen as an obstacle to development, in much of Southeast Asia the presence of elements of traditional Chinese culture, often labelled 'Confucianism,' is used to explain precisely the success of business and commerce within the Chinese communities there. In the People's Republic of China, increase and redistribution of wealth through economic development are important elements of the 12th five-year plan, implementation of which started in 2011.